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GOVERNOR

OPINION

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GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT IMPROVING OUR SCHOOLS MEANS CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

By Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter

After voters on November 6 rejected the process, pace and policies for improving Idaho's education system enacted in 2011, it became the task of everyone who cares about the quality of Idaho public schools to constructively continue that conversation.

My staff and I spent the next several weeks reaching out to educators, business leaders and Idaho citizens about staying engaged. Now that I'm optimistic we have a critical mass of interest, I've asked the State Board of Education to shepherd a statewide discussion about school improvement.

I'm asking the Board to guide the work of a broadly representative group of concerned Idahoans in studying best practices in school districts around the state and using data and experience to drive sound decision making. The group is likely to be large, but only large enough to include the diversity of opinion needed to properly study such a complex issue.

I'm not going to direct the discussion or the issues covered in any way. There must be no "third rail" in this conversation. But I am asking participants to come to the table ready to speak openly and candidly, and to bring ideas. I will not be prescriptive other than to say I remain committed to equal access to opportunity for our children and to increasing support for our educators.

The goal is to move education in Idaho forward for our students, our educators, and the businesses, colleges and universities that receive the product of our K-12 system. I do not expect this to be entirely about producing a legislative product. If participants find that best practices can be shared and schools improved without statutory changes, so be it.

Should legislation be necessary for school improvement efforts I expect this group to build consensus around those ideas by the 2014 legislative session. It is imperative that our partners in the Legislature engage in this process and I am pleased to have the support of House Speaker Bedke and the Senate President Pro Tem Hill in balancing this fragile dynamic.

I expect this group to have meaningful discussions and reach out to communities all across our state. For those groups representing educators, I am asking that they not only bring people to the table, but that they also serve as a conduit to their memberships in school districts throughout Idaho. Everyone involved will be responsible for the tone and substance of this conversation.

I'm asking that the Idaho Education Association, the Idaho Association of School Administrators, and the Idaho School Boards Association in particular reach out to a diverse cross-section of their members to join this process. I would hope they select members balancing urban and rural, small and large districts, but I also emphasize that the choices are theirs to make, and I trust them to make the right ones.

I am encouraged by the positive response to this initiative from education leaders.

"IEA members believe it is our moral imperative, as professionals, to be the voice for our students and for our profession. Research shows – and we believe – the one factor that can make the most difference in improving a student's achievement is a 'knowledgeable, skillful teacher' in front of the classroom," IEA President Penni Cyr said. "On behalf of the members of the IEA, we look forward to working with other stakeholders, including parents, business leaders and elected officials, to identify policy recommendations that will assure our state's students have access to a world-class education system."

"I have already met with representatives of each stakeholder group individually and am anxious to move beyond discussion through an open, transparent, accountable process so we can all take the steps necessary to move our education system forward," State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Luna said.

"With money being tight, we must find ways to most efficiently spend those dollars for the benefit of our children," Senate Education Chairman John Goedde of Coeur d'Alene said. "I look forward to serving and will come to the table with an open mind. I sincerely hope other stakeholders approach the meetings with a similar attitude."

"For more than a decade, Idaho has been engaged in school improvement efforts including the statewide development of education standards, student achievement assessments, teacher quality and professional development, and measures to increase rigor in high school to better prepare students for postsecondary education," State Board of Education President Ken Edmunds of Twin Falls said. "The Board appreciates the Governor's leadership as we take the next step in designing quality improvement efforts, and we look forward to a positive and inclusive process."

Men and women of good will can sometimes disagree passionately about the specifics of public policy, especially when it involves our children. But I'm confident we can broadly agree on the need for improving how we educate Idaho students, and I'm equally confident that the people of Idaho will rise to the occasion of this renewed opportunity for taking positive steps toward achieving our shared goals.

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